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Street Art as Process and Performance: The Subversive Streetness of Video-Documentation

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Abstract

This paper offers an initial response to the common framing of street art and graffiti as a form of creative expression that does not always translate well when removed from its indigenous urban context and placed in institutional gallery space. This framing is grounded in the apparent lack of correspondence between decontextualized works of urban art and the site-specific signification of street art and graffiti in situ, which invokes a phenomenologically powerful element of risk by recalling a dynamic creative performance. As RJ Rushmore notes, work on the street “is a kind of documentation of [...] a performance. Writers have to climb fences, repel down buildings, and break the law in highly visible places without being seen” (Rushmore, 2017). Accordingly, this paper argues for a greater priority to be given to a mode of displaying work in gallery space that more effectively conveys this vital element of illicit performativity—artists’ video-documentation of their creative process as performance. Four artists’ videos are described here as case studies that illustrate the subversive promise of this alternative approach to the rendering of street art in institutional contexts. Such documents are seldom subject to scholarly analysis nor displayed as works in their own right in formal art spaces, perhaps as they are not marketable in the same way as physical paintings or prints, however more recently artists’ videos have been included in some museum shows as additional cultural artefacts or supplements to more conventional works of urban art.

1. Introduction

The process through which [street] artists produce their [...] artefacts is customarily considered [...] to be as important an element of the overall practice as its resultant residual remains [...] the ephemeral performance [is] paramount, a more vital, efficacious element of the aesthetic than the final image in itself. (Schacter, 2015: 204)

It is common for graffiti and street art to be defined as fundamentally both an act and an aesthetic, with reference to some kind of dynamic creative performance as the powerful source of the resultant work. However, the institutionalized display of urban art has been critiqued for its inability to effectively capture this vital and foundational creative act (Chang, 2013). Indeed, Riggle (2010: 254) notes that “what is exhibited in the museum is at most a vestige of street art [and that] the experience of seeing street art in designated art spaces [...] invariably feels dead and inauthentic.” Less trenchant critics concur that, at the very least, displacing work from the street to the gallery diminishes its aesthetic power and can fundamentally alter its meaning (e. g. Young, 2015; Chang, 2013).

The currently dominant forms of institutionalised exhibition and display of urban art—in the form of sellable reproductions, limited edition prints, or other versions of work that may or may not have existed in some form, on city walls—have been dismissed by some critics as being “inauthentic”—and as falling short of capturing the “streetness”

of street art (Riggle, 2010).¹ Indeed, there are a number of distinctive aspects of this streetness that appear difficult—if not impossible—to (re)capture in formal gallery space. Foremost amongst these is the status of the artwork, by its very presentation as such in a “respectable” institutional space, as a complete and contained object, worthy of conservation and appreciation—and thus as no longer a dynamic (and often illicit) element in ephemeral dialogue with an abject and unpredictable urban environment. MacDowall has argued that a defining feature of street art (when in situ) is that it is “permanently unfinished,” and that, accordingly, works of street art should not be considered as the singular product of individual artists, but rather as, “unstable and permanently unfinished object[s], subject to both material decay and erasure and to semantic refashioning as the artworks and urban fabric change” (MacDowall, 2014: 36).

Despite these charges of inauthenticity in representation, and of the absence of streetness in contemporary urban art exhibitions, gallery shows featuring urban art remain popular and well-attended, perhaps in part as they appear to contain a residue of connection to the phenomenology of risk and the “wild” creative energy of work from the street. The question that remains, is then, how else could we represent street art in gallery space? Might there be a mode of exhibition that is less vulnerable to accusations of inauthenticity and lack of streetness? That is, is there a form of display or documentation that could operate to “bring this work (back) to life” and that might capture more effectively its distinctive, if ephemeral, phenomenological conditions of production (and destruction)?

2. Video-documentation as performance

Artists’ and writers’ video-documentation of both their creative process and the life of their works on the street are ideal resources for (re)activating the streetness of street art and graffiti. Rather than presenting street art as framed and finished works of urban art, such films operate as performative documents that animate the usually risky, invisible, and ephemeral conditions of production of street art, or what Schacter (2015: 204) has called “a sense of corporal illicitness”—offering a rare insight into the dynamism of these works in urban situ.

Street artists’ process videos are not (just) documents that reveal an original process of authentic creation. It may be argued that street art, as an ephemeral, performative art form, needs documentation as proof that it existed; and conversely, that this documentation (whether in the form of photographic stills of the kind often disseminated on social media, or in the form of moving images) in turn needs the original creative act to have occurred, and the original artwork to have existed (however momentarily) as an ontological anchor of its indexicality (Auslander, 1999). However, the power of artists’ process videos does not derive merely from their function as an indexical access point to past events in-the-world. Indeed, the creative performances they depict may or may not have even happened in actuality or real-time.

Artists’ video-documents should thus be regarded as performances in their own right. That is, their authority is not merely ontological and documentary, though this is certainly part of their power. Rather, their aesthetic impact is fundamentally phenomenological. They offer us presence in absentia—we do not need have to have witnessed the original events they depict in order to share in their aesthetic experience. Such illicit creative acts are unlikely to have had any public audience in any case, as they are usually carried out furtively, under cover of darkness (or at least, this is how we have been encouraged to imagine the creation of street art).

1 - Mural festivals have been similarly critiqued. Here work is painted on city walls, but the conditions of production (with the permission of authorities, painting openly by day, rather than secretly by night) are accused of not being ‘spontaneous’ or involving any risk to the artist.

Four artists' videos are discussed here in order to illustrate the potential of this form of documentation-as-performance to (re)animate graffiti and street art in gallery space. It should be noted that the selection of just four artists' videos represents only a partial overview of the wide range of available artists' video-documentation in circulation, particularly online. For instance, Brooklyn Street Art (which has a readership of two million) provides regular links to the growing body of street art videos, as part of its popular Film Friday feature. The decision to discuss just this restricted sample of videos here is primarily based on a desire to cover a few examples in depth, rather than to gloss many examples in *précis*, so as to initiate a preliminary discussion of some provocative elements of artists' documentation-as-performance and process-based art.

The videos selected as case studies for discussion are: NUG's (2009) *Territorial Pissings*; BLU's (2008) *Muto*; MOBSTR's (2016) *Progressions*; and MOMO's (2005) *Manhattan Tag*. These each invoke key aspects of the streetness of graffiti and street art, including its visceral and heightened "wild" performativity; its reputation as an abject and grotesque form of territory marking, and as an index of imminent "social breakdown" – yet also as a signifier of impending gentrification and social displacement; its capacity to spontaneously engage citizens in urban play and/or politics; and the teeming socio-visual life of city walls when viewed over time.

BLU and MOMO's video work have been previously covered in a number of high profile publications (e.g., Riggall, 2010; Young, 2014) and are, as such, perhaps almost obligatory inclusions in any review of artists' video-documentation. However, these artists' videos are ordinarily referred to as a supplemental index to their physical, street-based work, and are less commonly discussed as primary works in their own right. Thus, it seems justifiable to take a closer look at these pieces on their own merits, as performative documents that powerfully animate the life of these artists' work on the street. NUG's work has a similarly high profile as a controversial work of graffiti/video art, but this is the case primarily in Nordic contexts – here a wider dissemination, and more detailed discussion may prove fruitful, particularly as this work so powerfully conveys an element of the wild phenomenology and corporal illicitness of graffiti that eludes gallery space.² Finally, it should be noted that MOBSTR's work is included in this review despite the fact that it does not technically qualify as video art, as his *Progressions* are currently only accessible as an unfolding online series of time-lapse photographs. The inclusion of MOBSTR's work here reflects the multi-modal play of contemporary viewers' interactions with street art, between urban and virtual space.

The sequence of works discussed is not chronological. Rather the order of discussion reflects a curatorial intention to cover a diverse range of potential aesthetic and affective responses, from the chaotically and disruptively performative (NUG) to the grotesque and abject (BLU) to the playful and inclusive (MOBSTR and MOMO) and a variety of temporal modes – from the apparent "real time" of NUG's urgent performance to the radical compression of time found in BLU and MOBSTR's work. This order also reflects the differential priority placed by these artists on the role/presence and engagement of the urban citizen, which in turn effects the positioning of the viewer. The aesthetic impact of these artists' videos offers us a diversity of forms of presence in absentia, some apparently veridical, and some radically impossible, in actuality.

2 - My thanks to Jacob Kimvall and Erik Hannerz for bringing this work to my attention.



Fig. 1 - Territorial Pissings photo: ©NUG 2009.

Territorial Pissings (2009) by Swedish urban artist NUG is a video-installation that generated considerable controversy in Stockholm when it was released. *Territorial Pissings* was displayed at the Market Art Fair in Stockholm alongside precious antiques. The Market Art Fair is a prestigious Nordic fair for contemporary art and represents leading galleries from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland and Finland. After viewing the work, Lena Adelsohn Liljeroth, the Swedish Minister for Culture, declared that it was, “incredibly provocative. Graffiti is illegal by its very nature. This is not art” (Svantesson, 2009 cited in Kimvall, 2013). Her statement spurred a heated public debate of the status of the work as art, and in consequence, *Territorial Pissings* was removed from the art fair.

Territorial Pissings is a black and white video, with a shaky frame implying a handheld documentary camera-in-action. The film’s black and white monochrome is also an important element of its (gritty) “reality effect.” As Erickson (1999: 98) has noted:

There is a sense of mere utility in black-and-white, which points to the idea that documentation is really only a supplement to a performance... of which the (film) is primarily a reminder.

The video shows a hooded figure inside a subway car engaged in frenzied abandoned spray painting of the carriage before smashing a window and diving out of the train onto the platform. This video appears to document a wanton

and uncontrollable act of graffiti-as-vandalism—and this is certainly how the Swedish Minister for Culture responded to it. However, the passengers sitting in the carriage remain calm, and seem disinterested in the abject visual carnage being inflicted on the interior walls of the train. In contrast to the dampened affect of the passengers, who are present, but somehow absent and unaffected by the scene, the actions of the artist appear particularly frantic and chaotic, but also fundamentally dislocated from the quotidian urban reality of the oblivious passengers.

Territorial Pissings makes unambiguous reference to the discourse of graffiti as a form of abject territorial marking. Such aesthetic socio-moral judgements are based on long-held associations between graffiti and criminal activity, as a visible index of social deprivation and urban decay, and as a form of abjection and territory marking akin to public urination, as dirt or filth, or “matter out of place.” (Douglas, 2002: 36) NUG’s video constructs this creative practice as a form of visceral vandalism—a high energy and intensely performative act, offering viewers a sense of the heightened “wild” phenomenology of graffiti, and perhaps also a reminder of the importance of the attributes we value in more respectable art historical moments such as Action Painting—that is, painting as an energetic, instinctual and dynamic act and a form of “unfettered personal expression” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2016).

As Kimvall (2013) notes, despite its documentary aesthetic, and clear affective and political impact, NUG’s video is ultimately a film produced by an art school graduate, and exhibited at Sweden’s most prestigious art fair. *Territorial Pissings* very effectively indexes and animates the act of graffiti writing—with all of its criminalised associations, as demonstrated by the reaction of the cultural minister, and the consequent withdrawal of the work from the art fair.

4. BLU

MUTO (2008)

Italian urban artist BLU’s animated short film *Muto* (2008) expresses a similar abject frenetic energy to NUG’s *Territorial Pissings*, however this is not achieved by capturing the artist-in-motion. Rather, *Muto* is a moving image/animation, based on BLU’s photographs of his paintings in urban space, meticulously reassembled as film. This film is one of a series of animated films produced by BLU. These are available as a collection in BLU’s (2010) *Sketch Note-book*.

The beings depicted in *Muto* are grotesque, abject, and abased. BLU’s writhing figures consume themselves in increasingly violent transformations: they recede into the wall only to re-emerge as new bodies, intent on an endless movement through derelict urban spaces, in a relentless cycle of destruction and regeneration. They appear disturbingly complicit in their own fate—one figure removes its own head to hand it to a larger being, who immediately consumes it. Kristeva (1982) notes that the horror of the abject is located in its signification of the “symptoms of social breakdown.” And indeed, this cycle of consumption echoes the voracious appetites of late modern consumerism, and the vulnerability of urban environments, and ordinary urban citizens, to being swallowed alive by the inevitable march of gentrification.



Fig. 2 - Muto, photo: ©BLU 2008.

Muto is not a “cleaned up” animation, nor a polished end product. Even though BLU is absent from the frame, he retains an authorial creative presence by capturing traces of the process of producing the paintings that together comprise this film. Indeed, the traces of former versions of the painted figures are clearly visible on the walls they move across and through. They recall the act(s) of illicit painting that produced these apparently living beings. A churning stream of greyish white paint trails in their wake, tracing the palimpsest of their passage—both a partial erasure and a constant reminder of the active work of the artist as painter. These dimensional traces have the effect of softening the surface of the wall, like knife marks hollowed in butter, endowing these ordinarily grey and impassive surfaces with seething, teeming, abject life.

As with *Territorial Pissings*, ordinary urban inhabitants are also present in *Muto*. However, due to BLU’s time-lapse photography, these figures are only present in momentary flashes across the screen—the slowed temporality of BLU’s animated beings is somehow out of kilter with the ‘real time’ speed of the city, whose citizens zoom past the scene, unaware that the paintings being executed are moving in their own time. Like the passengers in NUG’s film, BLU’s pedestrians appear barely present—detached from the more vital energy of the work on the wall.

Muto offers the viewer a temporary escape from the alienating pace of urban existence, by offering an alternative temporal experience of the city. (Chang, 2013: 227) In doing so, BLU brings the walls to life, and shows street art as something that is mobile rather than static, “permanently unfinished” and open to erasure, rather than complete and contained. (MacDowall, 2014: 36; Riggle, 2010: 255)

5. MOBSTR

PROGRESSIONS (2016)



Fig. 3 - Progressions, photo: ©MOBSTR 2016.

MOBSTR's (2016) *Progressions*, like BLU's (2008) *Muto*, utilise time-lapse or repeat photography to animate the life of a wall, through recording a series of discrete paintings photographically, then reassembling the photographs as a consecutive series. However, MOBSTR's work is distinct from BLU's in that it involves a degree of collaborative authorship and play. The urban citizens in MOBSTR's work are not detached and alienated, but are often active interlocutors, leaving their own marks on the wall in response to MOBSTR's provocations. More recently, MOBSTR's *Progressions* have also involved virtual urban citizens as collaborative authors via his execution of a series of physical amendments to his work suggested by his social media following. The interactivity inherent to MOBSTR's work animates the multi-modal play of contemporary viewers' interactions with work on the street, in a democratic form of visual dialogue that melds urban and virtual spheres of action.

Unlike NUG's more abstract visceral spray painting, and BLU's representational figures, MOBSTR works primarily with text. His *Progressions* engage in interaction with the local authorities responsible for buffing—or painting over—illegal work on city walls. The evolving painting is thus effectively co-authored. *Progressions* offers the viewer an insight into an animated dialogue between the artist and those responsible for removing his work. This would ordinarily only be witnessed by local passersby, but by photographing each change made to the work on the wall (and uploading these to his website) MOBSTR stitches time together to animate these often witty exchanges—that may in real time have occurred days, or even weeks later. His work operates as a series of cheeky taunts designed to elicit a visual response from non-artist others. Like BLU, MOBSTR's work highlights destruction as generative, but MOBSTR's *Progressions* does not present destruction as abject or grotesque, but rather as a form of urban play through palimpsest—a crucial element in appreciating street art “in the wild” as a form of democratic “dialogue between the city and the people.” (Petri, 2015: 27)

6. MOMO

MANHATTAN TAG (2005)

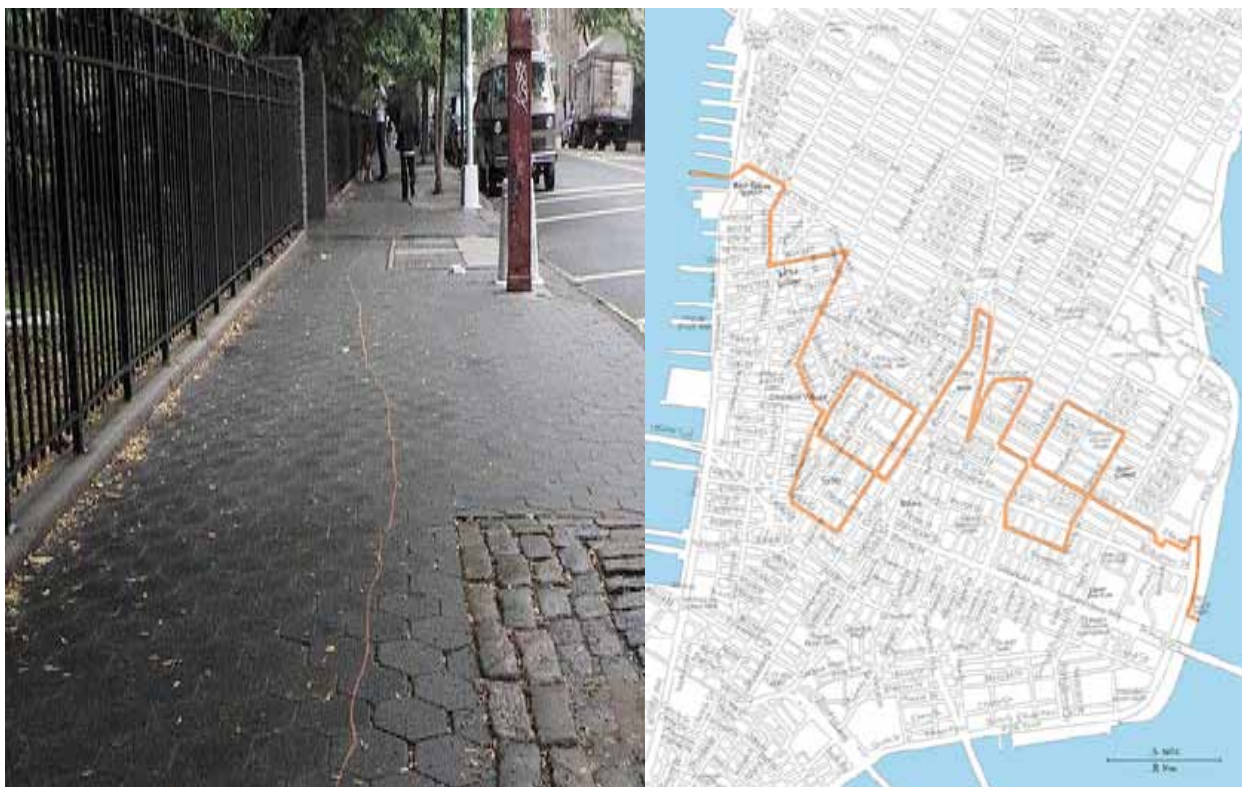


Fig. 4 - Manhattan Tag, photo: ©MOMO 2005.

MOMO's process video of the creation of his *Manhattan Tag* (2005) shows a continuously dripping line of paint that leaves a thin orange trail running along the sidewalk. He repainted this trail in 2011, as the first version had all but worn off under the constant abrasion of pedestrian footfall. Viewed from the sidewalk, the scale of the work is deceptively modest, and seems almost accidental, like the trail left unwittingly by a leaking container, that only incidentally tracks the movement of its unaware carrier.

However, as MOMO's *Manhattan Tag* video shows, if followed, this modest line seems unending—weaving around corners and out of sight. Cartographically, this apparently minimal work also exists on a more massive (non-human) scale (Abarca, 2016). A map displayed on MOMO's website reveals the form taken by this apparently inconsequential line: it forms a giant tag of MOMO's name, spanning the entire breadth of Manhattan island. As Young (2014) notes, the viewer's discovery of MOMO's map transforms this unassuming trickle of paint into an artwork too enormous to apprehend in its totality, although it may be traversed by foot, and simultaneously mapped as a virtual tag by activating the geo-location apps on our almost embodied smart phones.³

³ - Manhattan Tag is among the world's largest artworks. In scale, it is larger than Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty, Michael Heizer's Double Negative, and James Turrell's Roden Crater (Riggle, 2010).

Like MOBSTR's *Progressions*, MOMO's *Manhattan Tag* shows the production of a form of urban art that invites participation in situ. It offers a seemingly minimal aesthetic intervention, but one that when apprehended in its full signifying intent, may transform the viewer's sense of scale and being in the city. The contrast between the thin line of the paint that is immediately available to the senses, and the massive scale of the tag formed by the totality of the line, may be an initially confronting experience as it is not something that we can fully apprehend from our restricted view from the street (or, rather from the street presence in absentia offered by MOMO's process video). MOMO's map provides the viewer with the key to the puzzle posed by his wavering and seemingly inexhaustible thin line of paint. Riggle argues that this offers the viewer a sublime release from the initial overwhelming scale, and seeming lack of purpose or pattern, to the work. As he notes, "it is sweetly ironic that the biggest tag in the world is designed to be invisible in its entirety." (Riggle, 2010: 58)

7. Conclusion

These artists' videos provide for a mode of exhibition that compellingly conveys the ephemeral phenomenological conditions of production of work on the street. Video-documentation (both in real time, and over time) is a vibrant form of urban art that is arguably less likely to be met with the accusations of inauthenticity and lack of streetness that characterize the critical reception of street art as static works in gallery space. Artists' video-documentation may more effectively capture the streetness and illicit corporal performativity of the creation of work on the street and the inherent capacity of such work to arrest and engage onlookers. The aesthetic impact of these artists' videos offers us presence in absentia, which positions the viewer as both inside/outside gallery space.

A powerful aspect of the liminal presence afforded to the viewer by such video-documentation is the phenomenological experience of enchantment – an aesthetic response ordinarily restricted to our unanticipated encounters with work on the street. Young (2014: 45) argues that street art and graffiti may offer unexpected opportunities for ethical engagement as it arrests our otherwise fluid motion through urban space, which may in turn create productive fissures in our ordinary ways of seeing, and being with others, in the city. Conceived as a "tangle in the smooth spaces of the city out of which comes the potential for enchantment," these moments of arrest need not necessarily involve visual pleasure, but may instead be experienced as troubling, unsettling or *unheimlich*. Indeed, these videos together provoke a diversity of positive and negative affective responses, identifications and disidentifications – moments of vicariously seeing and viscerally experiencing other possible ways of being in the city that may fall outside of viewers' conventional expectations and realms of experience. Arguably, such moments of enchantment, even in absentia, may provide unexpected points of potential connection with others, and a sense of attachment within a potentially dehumanizing urban space. In this sense, artists' videos may afford the conditions of possibility for viewers to experience the forms of ethical engagement normally associated with our accidental encounters with work on the street.

These performative forms of documentation thus have the subversive potential to "bring work (back) to life" in gallery space, not just as artefacts or supplements to sellable works, but as powerful works of urban art in their own right, which serve also to remind us of the critical outsider stance, always unfinished energy, and participatory democratic nature, of work on the street. However, as yet, this is currently not a form of work adopted as a primary mode of exhibition by many galleries, for artists' video-documentation is – along with performance art and street art itself – a "per se non-sellable form of art" and a "consumer critical art form that criticizes the role of an art object as a consumer product" (Blanché 2016).

Although not considered in the process videos included here, the photographic documentation of the entire lifecycle of work in urban situ may also offer a means to translate the transitory nature of such work in otherwise protected gallery space. By documenting the gradual decay in situ of street art and graffiti (e.g. Hansen and Flynn, 2015) we may highlight the defining ephemerality of work in the streets, which is, unlike work in gallery-space, subject to environmental degradation and decay, as it is constantly exposed to the elements. For instance, SWOON's paste up work depicts destruction as inevitable and beautiful. Rather than simply animating the more stereotypically masculine adrenaline-fuelled conditions of production of street art, SWOON's work attunes us to the ephemerality and fragile lifecycle of work on the street. This, too, is part of what is not ordinarily captured in either white cube contexts or street art festivals, where the work featured is pristine and protected from the elements, and from being buffed by authorities or written over by others. Indeed, Riggle (2010) argues that, for a work to count as street art, the "artist must willingly expose their work to the risks of defacement, destruction, theft, alteration and appropriation; in short, [they] must be committed to ephemerality."

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